

General Conclusions and Recommendations

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Conclusions

The aim of this book has been to describe and analyse foreign language education in Hungary to provide a baseline study for the Examination Reform. We have looked at a smorgasbord of areas: starting from the wider socio-educational and sociolinguistic context we analysed a variety of school-leaving and entrance exams, reviewed public examinations available in English as a foreign language in the country, provided an overview and in-depth analysis of students' performances on proficiency tests in English, tapped into all stakeholders' views, surveyed how testing issues featured on the agenda of pre- and in-service teacher education, and taken our readers into classrooms all around the country to reflect on every-day school practice. Although in our empirical studies we conducted research into English only, similar findings have been published recently on German as a foreign language (Einhorn, 1998). Therefore, we believe that our findings and recommendations are relevant for other languages as well.

Various points of departure offer themselves for drawing final conclusions, among them what we have learnt about students, teachers, other stakeholders, examinations and educational processes.

The attitudes of the population are favourable towards foreign languages in general; Hungarians appreciate the knowledge of languages and certificates of proficiency in them. With Hungary's integration into the European Union drawing near, special emphasis is placed on the enhancement of skills in modern languages. The major questions are related to how all Hungarian students will achieve required levels in two modern languages, and what the necessary conditions for this involve. For the time being, the situation is paradoxical: state education can hardly cater for students' needs, as almost half of the student population gets private tuition to attain desirable levels. On the other hand, school-leaving examinations are known to be unreliable; therefore, students need to pass prestigious and expensive external proficiency exams designed for adults.

As has been demonstrated, students' levels of English vary to a great extent, and there seem to be reasons for rejoicing and despair. In comparison with Dutch students, though Hungarians performed at lower levels, they did relatively well despite major differences in the conditions of language learning. As for their performances in an international test and the state language exams, quite a number of students attained good results, despite some unfamiliar task types and their lack of test wiseness. Unfortunately, these student samples were not representative of the population, as schools tended to volunteer their better students and high-stakes exams are mostly attempted by more proficient candidates. Therefore, we have not been able to collect empirical data on the lowest levels in state education. Results must be viewed critically, as in representative enquiries an even wider range of performances can be expected. Also, we have looked at English only, and we have not assessed students' levels in two modern languages, as will soon be required. There is no way of telling how many of the secondary-school students of today would be able to pass in more than one foreign language.

Students' performances were sampled mostly in reading, translation and writing tasks; our knowledge is still limited about the population's oral skills. We found the development of

listening comprehension to be the neglected skill in language classes and had limited access to empirical data on how well Hungarian students perform in listening and speaking tasks. Although the development of the oral skills is a must, in our experience not enough emphasis is laid on them in classrooms. This is in contrast with what has been found in relation to students' results in the written and oral school-leaving exams. In the oral exams students tend to outperform their own achievements in the reading and writing tasks. The reasons for this tendency are suspected to relate to subjective marking, the lack of criteria for assessment, as well as the lack of external quality control.

Level setting is a highly problematic area. Further research is necessary to find out whether the Threshold Level is a realistic aim for the Basic Exam at the end of year 10, or the school-leaving exam at the end of year 12. More empirical data is needed to place Hungarian students' typical performances along the 6-level European scale more precisely (*Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment: A Common European Framework of Reference*, 1996).

Although it is widely accepted that the two best predictors of successful foreign-language learning include aptitude and motivation, no attempt has been made to enquire into the first. No systematic data collection has been conducted on how students' positive attitudes and favourable motivations change over time as they progress with their studies, and how these processes contribute to their language acquisition. It has been found that prestigious proficiency exams represent a strong external, instrumental motive for students and their parents, but we have not been able to explore motivational issues in more detail. In unfavourable educational conditions teachers blamed the lack of success on students' low motivation and problematic cognitive variables (Chapter 8), but further research is necessary to reveal how and to what extent they are interrelated.

Findings have supported what teachers have complained about for the last couple of years. The performance of year 12 students is worse than that of year 11 students. Good students take the state language exam before year 12 and gain exemption from attending classes. The proficiency of the groups in year 12 lowers, as good students are not present. As teachers in the interviews and written comments in Chapter 2 claimed, without practice and inspiration some of the certificate holders gradually lose some of their proficiency as they are not stretched in school any more. Year 12 students were found to perform at lower levels than year 11 candidates do on proficiency tests (Chapter 5) as they are the ones who were not good enough to pass a year earlier.

We have found that the lack of continuity in language programmes represents a serious drawback and results in the mismanagement of human resources. As Chapter 8 illustrates, transition from primary to secondary schools is often problematic. Teachers have little information about students' language studies in the primary schools and both teachers and students need to cope not only with mixed-ability but also mixed-level groups. With the liberal school structure and curricula there is no way of controlling when students start their foreign language studies at what pace. We suspect that an enormous amount of effort, time, money and enthusiasm is wasted, as students at average secondary schools are not streamed according to their levels, but tend to be placed in beginners' groups with students who have done less or no language study. Sometimes after between four and eight years of studying a language students cannot continue it at all, but are forced to start a new language. This situation is partly caused by parental pressure put on primary schools to launch foreign language courses as soon as possible, partly by schools lacking resources for running different courses to satisfy students' needs. More research is needed into how the length and intensity of language courses in state education contribute to learners' language development, and how a smooth transition from primary to secondary schools can be achieved.

The number of classes per week is one of the frequently mentioned factors expected to predict success in language study. This commonly held view is also reflected by the extremely high rate (40%) of students attending private classes. Most stakeholders believe that a certain

number of classes a week are necessary to achieve good results, but in our enquiries into students' performances we did not aim to collect data on the relationship between the intensity and the success of language study.

A serious social implication of this problem relates to the issue of equal opportunities in state education. The vast majority of middle-class parents ensure that their children benefit from special early intensive programmes, often supplemented by private tuition, whereas children from less favourable social backgrounds are doomed to normal classes (as illustrated in Chapter 8). In prestigious schools students tend to be streamed according to their achievements so that better learners are placed in more intensive courses, while lower achievers are deprived of more opportunities and get less tuition. This practice contradicts what is known about language aptitude: all learners are capable of attaining communicative competence but some develop fast, others slow. Slower students need more time and instruction; therefore, they should be placed in intensive programmes.

As has been expected, teachers play a vital role in what students achieve. In the survey on stakeholders' views, about 90 percent of the parents and students ranked them first among the most important factors determining students' success. It seems that more depends on the teacher than on how intensive and long the language course is. It would be extremely useful to define what features characterise effective teachers and good classroom practice, but these aims were beyond our baseline study.

As for teachers' qualifications, many of the secondary-school teachers observed during the classroom research project were inappropriately trained for the age group and the school type where they work. In the next couple of years they will need to upgrade their degrees in in-service programmes to be able to keep their jobs. Hopefully, these programmes will promote classroom techniques of good practice and skill development. Teachers will also need focused training in testing and evaluation, as such expertise could not only contribute to their own professional development, but is also necessary for the preparation of the Examination Reform. Fortunately, these needs coincide with the introduction of the mandatory in-service teacher development scheme of the ministry, thus providing a legal and financial framework. In the next few years all teachers will have to become familiar with the innovative features of the new exams. All teachers involved in the administration of the exams will need to be trained as markers and interlocutors.

The quality of the current school-leaving exam has been proved to be inadequate, and this is why external, more reliable examinations have gradually replaced it. Today there is no unified school-leaving exam: it exists in a dozen different versions, designed by three independent bodies. It is based on norm referencing; criteria for assessment are loosely compiled and subjectively applied. Levels change from year to year, data are not analysed, the four skills are not equally weighted, and there is no training for examiners.

While teachers agree that the current school-leaving examination is virtually meaningless and invalid, they appreciate the fact that most of their students get a 4 or a 5, and are thus in some way motivated. However, any change to the school-leaving exam that makes it more reliable, valid and acceptable to employers, universities and the education authorities is bound to involve an examination in which students get lower marks, or indeed which more students fail. Thus, teachers and students can be expected to resist change.

A publicity campaign is needed in which the faults of the current school-leaving exam are made plain, and the value is emphasised of having an examination that all can respect, that will record the level of achievement of all learners in a valid and reliable way. The new exam should not brand anybody as a failure, but it should indicate the level of achievement of students against internationally recognised levels (like those of the Council of Europe), and it should leave it up to employers and universities to decide what they consider to be acceptable levels of achievement for their purposes.

During the last 20 months while preparing this book we have seen many exciting (and some worrying) developments in politics, education and other walks of life. Some of the facts we have

described in the Baseline Study may strike our readers as outdated; others may have become more prominent over the last few months. It has been impossible to integrate all recent phenomena into such a short volume. We are aware of a recent shift back to a more centralised educational management structure, but wonder how favourable the influence will be on foreign language education. Also, we know that the state language examination (SFLEB) will not be the same after the accreditation process is over.

In the meantime important documents have been compiled and will soon become public: among them the Detailed Requirements and Specifications of the Basic Exam (*Az alapképesítési vizsga részletes követelményrendszere*), and the Detailed Requirements and Specifications of the School-leaving Exam (*Az érettségi vizsga részletes követelményrendszere*). In a few months the first piloting of the innovatory exams is to take place, tasks are being written and trialled, and an increasing number of teachers are getting involved in, and thrilled by, the Examination Reform Project. Hopefully, by 2002 all tasks necessary for the successful launching of a three-level proficiency exam in modern languages will have been accomplished, and the second volume of this book will have been written. Then we can sit back and watch how the exams go live. And soon after that we can buckle down to improving them.

Recommendations

As stated in the General Introduction of this book, one of the aims has been to conclude by compiling a list of recommendations for the successful implementation of the Examination Reform. In a few years' time we hope to refer back to it and report on how these recommendations have been borne in mind and how many of the suggestions have come true.

General recommendations for language policy makers

- The Ministry of Education should develop a language policy document including priorities of aims and objectives, projects, finances, deadlines and names of officials in charge
- A central body should be responsible for the development, implementation and quality control of curricula and examinations
- It should be reconsidered whether language certificates for all Hungarian students in one or two modern languages is a realistic aim
- The number of classes per week allocated to one or two foreign languages in the National Core Curriculum needs careful reconsideration
- Continuity of language programmes and smooth transition from primary to secondary schools needs to be ensured
- Funds have to be available for the new exams to become sustainable after their introduction.

Recommendations for the Examination Reform

- A central body should be responsible for designing and piloting tasks, administering and marking exams at all three levels, feeding results back to the developmental process, training of examiners and publicity
- A publicity campaign is needed to raise students', teachers' and other stakeholders' awareness of the advantages of the new exams
- The media should be exploited to keep students, teachers and parents updated on progress on the development of new examinations to prevent and reduce resistance to change
- A coordinated, standardised three-level exam should be established
- Levels of the new exams should be in harmony with those of the Council of Europe
- The new examination should record the level of achievement of all students in a valid and reliable way
- Careful level setting is necessary to pitch the three levels realistically, so that results motivate and do not frustrate students and other stakeholders
- We recommend that students' achievements should be indicated along a 1 to 100 point scale to record the wide range of performances at three levels, thus providing detailed information in addition to traditional marks
- Students' achievements should be separately indicated in the four skills and in the fifth component at the advanced level
- The four skills should be equally weighted
- Students' performances should be carefully and systematically documented, and results sent back to schools and stored for analysis and research purposes
- Criterion-based exams should replace norm-referenced examinations
- External marking should replace internal marking as much as possible
- Examiner training should form an integral part of the Examination Reform

- Students not leaving state education after year 10 should be encouraged to take the Basic Exam in modern languages so that they get feedback on their performances and develop test-taking skills
- The Basic Exam should be available as an option in a first and second foreign language for year 11 and 12 students
- We suggest that better students should be encouraged to attempt the exams at two levels at the same time (basic and intermediate, or intermediate and advanced) and they should get feedback on their achievements on the 1 to 100 scale, but only their achieved level should be documented in their school reports
- The traditional timescale of school-leaving exams has to be rescheduled as externally marked exams take longer to process, similarly to current entrance exams
- Statistics on students' performances on exams should be made public
- Guidelines for task writers, interlocutors and markers should become public
- Exam preparation materials and practice tests should be published soon.

Recommendations for teacher education

- Teachers have to be involved in the Examination Reform and their current favourable attitudes need to be strengthened and maintained
- Teachers' awareness must be raised towards the faults of the current school-leaving exam
- Courses on testing and exam preparation should be integrated into pre-service curricula
- Training of examiners should take place as part of mandatory in-service teacher development
- Methodology courses both in pre- and in-service teacher education should emphasise good practice, skills development, and efficient use of teaching materials and authentic resources
- All teachers must become familiar with new exam task types
- Techniques of developing the listening skills need special attention, as testing listening comprehension will be a new component at the school-leaving exam
- Teachers must be made aware of how classroom management in the target language develops students' listening skills
- Teachers should be encouraged to exploit input available outside the classroom
- All teachers should be aware how to motivate students and maintain their motivation in the long run
- Techniques of dealing with mixed-ability and mixed-level groups should be promoted
- Teachers must become more careful in choosing materials for teaching and exam preparation
- Classroom research techniques should be introduced to trigger reflection on teachers' own practice and to enhance cooperation among teachers.

Recommendations for further research

- Longitudinal studies are needed to monitor students' progress, their classroom assessment and their performances on the new exams
- Research is needed to explore how teachers' target language use contributes to students' language development
- Research should be conducted into how methodology and examiner training changes teachers' classroom practice
- Research should explore how students would perform on foreign language exam task types in their first language
- Empirical studies are needed on good practice and effective exam preparation.